

PROSPECT: OR, VIEW OF THE MORAL WORLD.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 1805.

NO. 5.

COMMENTS UPON THE SACRED WRITINGS OF THE
JEWS AND CHRISTIANS.

BOOK OF LEVITICUS.

If revelation be mingled with vice and folly, the character of revelation, in such case, is completely destroyed. This is the fact in regard to the Bible, and thousands of instances can be adduced to prove the truth of the assertion. In the sixteenth chapter of this book, we are called to contemplate the unnatural and unjust means which Jewish theology employed for the destruction of moral evil. One part of the passage to which we allude, is only a repetition of the old story over again, a resort to bloody sacrifices; the other part of the passage possesses a less serious character, and a very novel method of transporting national iniquity. This portion of Holy Writ must be quoted and subjected to that intellectual scrutinization which the nature of the case so forcibly demands.

"And Aaron shall offer his bullock of the sin-offering, which is for himself, and make an atonement for himself, and for his house.—ver. 6. And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness. And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited; and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness."—verses 21st and 22d.

It will be impossible to pass through this system of theological iniquity, without constantly observing the violation of moral principle. This violation deserves the severest reproach, and the repetition of this idea has become necessary by the frequent recurrence of passages which are at war with justice. How can any man suppose that a slaughtered bull or ram, a he-goat or wild pigeon, can make atonement for sin, or correct the vitiated propensities of men? This portion of *holy writ*, however, shows what ideas the chosen people of God had upon this subject, and that they were as ignorant of the true theory of morality, as they were destitute of good moral practices. Aaron's bullock it seems was to be a cure for his own sins and that of the Jewish nation; but it will be said that this kind of shedding of blood was typical of Christ. Types and shadows and prophecies, were extremely common in former ages; but they were mere impositions of mystery upon the people. In the language of the author of the *Age of Reason*, we may say, *that a blunder would have answered for a prophecy, and a dishonesty for a type*. The whole of the Old Testament is filled with the marvellous, and all the great concerns of human nature, according to that book, were formerly regulated in a very different manner from what they are and ought to be at present. If, however, some improvements have been made, there is still remaining a great

portion of incoherent matter, which ought to be subjected to the operations of reason, and decided upon according to the principles of science and justice. In the 21st and 22d verses of this chapter, there is a ludicrous representation of the manner in which the Jewish people freed themselves from the burden of individual and national crimes. This was done by the means of priestcraft and mysterious conjuration; Aaron made confession upon the head of a goat, and after having packed up in one bundle the sins of a nation, he placed this bundle upon the head of the goat, and sent him away, god speed, into the wilderness! This is a curious and singular mode of transporting the crimes of a nation to a distant country. Is there any man in his senses, can believe that a priest, a goat, and a servant-man, by a few idle ceremonies, could destroy the vices or remove the moral evil of which a whole nation might be guilty. Such concession would be a sacrifice of all that is excellent in the nature of moral principle, and an insult to the energy of human reason. This Jewish scape-goat, cuts but an awkward figure in any system of religion, and nothing but the most stupid credulity could presume that moral utility could result from this theological farce, so dexterously played off by the leaders of the Jewish nation. Let us suppose, for example, that all the clergy of New-York, as legitimate descendants and representatives of Aaron, the Jewish priest, should combine together, and bring into any one of the churches a goat, devoted to the grand and important purpose of removing the vices of themselves, and transporting the sins of the people: that after conjuring about this stupid animal for a while, and laying their pious hands upon his devoted head, they should start him for the Genesee country, under the care and inspection of a stout, persevering, and athletic man, is there a reasonable being upon the face of the earth, is there any well-informed man that could believe, for a single moment, that such a childish and disgusting ceremony bore the smallest relation to the nature of moral principle, or the happiness of mankind? No, a case of this sort would be an object of universal contempt, and the actors themselves subjected to complete ridicule. Look, then, ye leaders in Christianity, to your Jewish goat—to this scape-goat of antiquity, and you will find it possess no more virtue than the goats of modern times, and that it is credulity, and not reason, that applauds such idle stories.

THE DEVIL, HELL-TORMENTS, HUMAN MALEVOLENCE.

Vengeance is mine, and I will repay, saith the Lord. This is one of those beautiful and benevolent passages of holy writ, so consoling to the heart of the true believer; for it ought to be remarked, that the true spirit of revealed religion is a crusading, murdering, revengeful spirit! It is pregnant with carnage and with death, with hell-torments and eternal damnation! There is, however, one sect of Christians, the Universalists, far exalted in point of sentiment above all others; and this sect has made great efforts to raise the character of God above those diabolical descriptions so often bestowed upon him, by the malevolent and persecuting spirit of Christian Fanaticism; they have made a complete distinction between God and the Devil, having completely overturned the empire of the latter, which is much more than

can be said, with truth, of any other denomination. The Devil, among all other sectaries, is a very important character; he is second in command throughout the unlimited regions of space; and according to the opinion of some hot-headed fanatics, will one day triumph over the wisdom of Jehovah himself. They affirm that the number of the Devil's subjects will eventually exceed the number allotted to God, in the proportion of an hundred to one. If this should turn out to be the case, it is an hundred to one, if the Devil does not get the upper hand, and dethrone his celestial antagonist. They had one battle-royal some time ago, and, according to the best accounts, the contest for a long time was dubious, and at last, but barely turned in favour of the present ruling party. Who knows, then, according to this idea, how soon we may be placed under a different government, and taste, as Mahomet says, the pain of burning! But stop—if the Christian opinions be true upon this subject, is there any thing to be lost? The Presbyterians, &c. say, we shall burn in hell forever, under the just vengeance of an unrelenting God; we cannot be worse off under the empire and dominion of the Devil. And if the peaceful and philosophic mind had no better hope than that which results from taking chance under the vindictive power of the Christian God, or the rancorous malice of his Infernal Majesty, the prospect would be dreary indeed! Genuine philosophy, however, teaches lessons and discloses doctrines of a different kind; it teaches man that he ought to repress that spirit of malignity with which he has been inspired by revealed religion. It teaches, also, that his true interests depend upon the cultivation of a just, humane disposition; that his own happiness is interwoven with that of others, and also, that in proportion as he injures his fellow-creatures, in the same proportion the evil will one day recoil upon himself. Man! turn thy attention to the dignity of virtue—it is the road to happiness; and will cover thine existence with immortal glory!

MEN are not surprised at those effects of which they know the cause; they disbelieve they know the cause, as soon as they see them act in an uniform and immediate manner, or when the motion they produce is simple: the descent of a stone that falls by its own peculiar weight, is only an object of meditation for a philosopher, to whom the mode by which the most immediate causes act, and the most simple motions make not mysteries less impenetrable, than the most complicated motion, and the manner by which the most remote causes act. The uninformed are never tempted to examine the effects which are familiar to them, nor to recur to their first principles. They think they see nothing in the descent of a stone which ought to surprise them, or which merits their researches: there wants a Newton to feel that the descent of heavy bodies is a phenomena worthy of all his attention: there wants the sagacity of a profound experimental philosopher, to discover the laws, according to which bodies fall, and communicate to others their peculiar motion. In short, that mind, the most practised in philosophical observations, has frequently the chagrin to find, that the most simple and most common effects escape all his researches, and remain inexplicable to him.

We are tempted to meditate upon, and consider those effects which

present themselves to our view, when they are extraordinary or unusual ; that is to say, when our eyes are not accustomed to them, or when we are ignorant of the energy of the cause, that we see act. It is not the European, who has not seen the effects of gunpowder : the workman who labours in the manufacture of it, thinks there is nothing marvellous in it, because he handles every day the matter which enters into the composition of this powder. The American used formerly to look upon the effect as a *power divine*, and its force as *supernatural*. Thunder, of which the uninformed do not know the true cause, is regarded by them as the instrument of celestial vengeance....the experimental philosopher regards it as the natural effect of the electric matter, which is nevertheless itself a cause which he is very far from understanding perfectly.

Let it be as it may, as soon as we see a cause act, we regard its effect as natural ; as soon as we are accustomed to the sight, or are familiarized with it, we believe we understand it, and its effects surprise us no more : but as soon as we perceive an unusual effect, without discovering the cause, our mind is set to work, it is uneasy in proportion to the extent of this effect ; when we believe our preservation interested, our mind is compleatly agitated ; we inquire into the cause, and our perplexity is augmented in proportion as we are persuaded that it is essential for us to know the cause by which we have been affected in so lively a manner. Instead of our senses, which frequently can teach us nothing of the causes and effects which we search after with so much ardour, or which interest us the most, we have recourse to our imagination, which, troubled and enervated by fear, becomes a suspicious guide, and we create chimeras, or fictitious causes, to which we give the credit, and the honour of those phenomena which have alarmed us. It is to this disposition of the human mind that it is to be attributed, as we shall see in the sequel, all the religious errors of men, who, despairing of ever being able to trace the natural causes of those perplexing phenomena, of which they were the witnesses, and frequently the victims, have created in their brain imaginary causes, which have become to them a source of follies.

However, there can only be in nature natural causes and effects. All the motion that she excites follows constant and necessary laws : those natural operations which we are capable of knowing or of judging, are sufficient to enable us to discover those which escape our sight ; we can at least judge of them by analogy ; and if we study nature with attention, the modes of action which she shews to us will teach us not to be so disconcerted by those which she refuses to discover to us. The causes the most remote from their effects indubitably act by intermedial causes, with the aid of which we can sometimes trace out the first : if in the chain of these causes we sometimes find obstacles that oppose themselves to our researches, we ought to endeavour to overcome them, and if we cannot surmount them, we never have the right to conclude that the chain is broken, or that the cause which acts is *supernatural*. Let us then content ourselves with avowing, that Nature has resources that we know not of ; but let us never substitute phantoms, fictions, imaginary causes, or words devoid of sense, for those causes which escape us ; by which means we only confirm our

selves in our ignorance, impede our researches, and obstinately remain in error.

In spite of the ignorance in which we are, with respect to the ways of Nature, or of the essence of beings, of their properties, of their elements, of their proportions, and their combinations, we know, however, the simple and general laws, according to which bodies move; and we see that some of these laws, common to all beings, never contradicted themselves; although they appear to vary on some occasions, we are frequently enabled to discover, that the cause becoming complicated, in combining with others, impedes and prevents its mode of action, being such as we believe we have a right to expect. We know that fire applied to powder must necessarily set it alight: whenever this effect is not produced; whenever our senses do not make us know it, we have a right to conclude that this powder is damp, or else that it is joined to some substance that prevents its explosion. We know that man in all his actions tends to render himself happy; when we see him labouring to destroy himself, or to injure himself, we ought to conclude that he is moved by some cause which is opposed to his natural tendency; that he is deceived by some prejudice; that for want of experience, he does not see whither his actions will lead him.

If all the motion of beings were simple, it would be very easy to know them, and we should be assured of the effect which the cause ought to produce, if their actions did not blend, and mix with each other. I know that a stone that falls ought to descend perpendicularly: I know that it is obliged to take an oblique course, if it meets with another body that changes its direction; but I no longer know what line it will describe if it is interrupted in its fall by several contrary forces which alternately act upon it; it may then be, that these forces will oblige it to describe a parabolical, a circular, a spiral, an elliptical line, &c.

The most compound motion is, however, never more than the result of simple motions which are combined; thus, as soon as we know the general laws of being and their motion, we have only to decompose and to analyze them, to discover those which are combined; and experience teaches us the effects we may expect. We see then that the most simple motions are the causes of the necessary junction of the different matter of which all bodies are composed; that matter, varied in its essence and its properties, have each their modes of action or motions which are peculiar to them, and that their whole motion is the sum total of the particular motions which are combined.

Amongst the matters that we see, some are constantly disposed to unite, whilst others are incapable of union; those which are proper to unite, form combinations more or less intimate and durable, that is to say, more or less capable of preserving their state and resisting dissolution. The bodies which we call *solids*, are composed of a greater number of homogeneous, similar, and analogous particles, disposed to unite, themselves, and of which the powers conspire or tend to the same end. The primitive beings, or the elements of bodies, have occasion to be propped or supported, to say thus, the one by the other, to the end that they may preserve themselves, and acquire consistence and solidity; a truth equally constant in what they call *physical*, and what they call *moral*.

It is upon this disposition of matter and bodies, the one relatively to the others, that are founded their modes of action, which the natural philosophers designate under the names of *attraction* and *repulsion*, of *sympathy* and *antipathy*, of *affinities* or *relations*. The moralists designate this disposition and the effects which it produces, under the names of *love* and *hatred*, of *friendship* or *aversion*. Men, like all the beings of Nature, experience the motion of attraction and repulsion; those which pass in them differing from the others only because they are more concealed, and that frequently we know not the causes which excite them, nor their mode of action.

Whatever it may be, it suffices us to know, that by a constant law certain bodies are disposed to unite themselves with more or less facility, whilst others cannot combine or unite themselves: water combines itself with salts, but will not mix with oils. Some combinations are very strong, as in metals, others are very feeble, and are easily decomposed. Some bodies, incapable of uniting by themselves, become susceptible of union by the aid of new bodies, which serve for *intermediates* or common bonds; it is thus that oil and water combine themselves, and make soap by the aid of an alkaline salt. From all these beings diversely combined, in proportions extremely varied, result all the physical or moral bodies, of which the properties and the equalities are essentially different, and of which the modes of action are more or less complicated, or difficult to understand, by reason of the elements or matter which have entered into their composition, and the different modifications of this same matter.

It is thus that in the reciprocal attraction of the primitive and insensible particles of matter, of which all bodies are formed, they become sensible, forming mixed bodies, aggregate masses, by the union of similar and analogous matter, whose essence renders them proper to join together to form a whole. These same bodies dissolve themselves, or their union is broken, whenever they experience the action of any substance that is an enemy to their junction. It is thus that by little and little is formed a plant—a metal—an animal—a man—that each in the system or rank that it occupies, increases or grows, that they sustain themselves in their respective existence by the continual attraction of analogous or similar matter, which unites itself to their being—which preserves them, and which strengthens them. It is thus that certain aliments become fit for man, whilst others kill him—that some are pleasant to him, and strengthen him—that others are repugnant to him, and weaken him: in short, never to separate the physical from the moral laws. It is thus that men, attracted by their wants, the one to the other, from those unions that they call *marriages*, *families*, *societies*, *friendships*, *connexions*, and that virtue maintains and strengthens them, but that vice relaxes or totally dissolves them.

Whatever may be the nature and the combination of beings, their motions have always one direction or tendency; without direction we cannot have an idea of motion: this direction is regulated by the properties of each being: as soon as they have any given properties they necessarily act, that is to say, they follow the law invariably determined by these same properties which constitute the being, such as it is, and its mode of action, which is always a consequence of its manner of existence. But what is the general or common tendency or direction

which we see in all beings? What is the visible and known end of all their motion? It is to conserve their actual existence—it is to preserve them—it is to strengthen them—it is to attract that which is favourable to them—it is to repel that which can harm them—it is to resist impulsions contrary to their manner of being and their natural tendency.

ENTHUSIASM.

IMMEDIATE revelation being a much easier way for men to establish their opinions and regulate their conduct than the tedious and not always successful labour of strict reasoning; it is no wonder that some have been very apt to pretend to revelation, and to persuade themselves that they are under the peculiar guidance of heaven in their actions and opinions, especially in those of them which they cannot account for by the ordinary methods of knowledge and principles of reason. Hence we see, that in all ages, men in whom melancholy has mixed with devotion, or whose conceit of themselves has raised them into an opinion of a greater familiarity with God, and a nearer admittance to his favour, than is afforded to others, have often flattered themselves with a persuasion of an immediate intercourse with the Deity, and frequent communications from the Divine Spirit. God, I own, cannot be denied to be able to enlighten the understanding by a ray darted into the mind immediately from the fountain of light. This they understand he has promised to do; and who then has so good a title to expect it as those who are his peculiar people, chosen by him, and depending on him?

Their minds being thus prepared, whatever groundless opinion comes to settle itself strongly upon their fancies, is an illumination from the Spirit of God, and presently of Divine authority; and whatsoever odd action they find in themselves a strong inclination to do, that impulse is concluded to be a call or direction from heaven, and must be obeyed; it is a commission from above, and they cannot err in executing it.

This I take to be properly enthusiasm; which, though founded neither on reason nor divine revelation, but rising from the conceits of a warmed or overweening brain, works yet, where it once gets footing, more powerfully on the persuasions and actions of men, than either of those two or both together: men being most forwardly obedient to the impulses they receive from themselves; and the whole man is sure to act more vigorously, where the whole man is carried by a natural motion. For strong conceit, like a new principle, carries all easily with it when got above common sense; and freed from all restraint of reason and check of reflection, it is heightened into a divine authority in concurrence with our own temper and inclination.

LOCKE.

HEATHEN IDOLATRY.

THE heathen idolatry is a common topic of declamation and abuse on occasions of this nature. It stands, with modern absurdity and fol-

ly, in the same circumstances with a woman who has been beautiful, but whose charms are faded, and who is ever the object of the most malignant satire to another who is distinguished with a native and original ugliness. The superstitions of the ancients, like their beautiful edifices, are defaced only by time and violence. The communities of antiquity, in their decline, seem to have been like some great minds in the decline of life ; who are said to retain their former conclusions, while they have totally forgotten the premisses and calculations which had led them to them. The Heathen mythology is natural philosophy allegorized and abused by poets and priests : Jupiter and Juno, and Minerva and Neptune, were personifications of real principles in nature ; whereas the phantoms of modern superstition are representations of no true objects in heaven or earth. The former were in the state of all similies, metaphors, and poetical ornaments, liable to be misunderstood and abused ; but they were also useful, and furnished the most elegant entertainment and pleasure : the latter, being the produce only of perverted and gloomy imaginations, are never useful, never pleasing ; but merely the instruments of imposture, to intimidate and injure mankind. Idolatry, therefore, was to be restrained, as all excesses of natural passions are to be restrained. For, by fixing the attention wholly on poetical persons, men were led away from nature, the only source of truth ; they easily wandered into follies and vices ; and their whole system fell a sacrifice to more extravagant and mysterious institutions. The emperor Julian seems to have had these ideas ; and he lived at the very period of this remarkable revolution. He probably thought, that men were not at so great distance from the real principles of nature and truth, and would not require so much trouble to lead them back to those principles, while they adhered to the Heathen idolatry, as when the ambitious Christian priests had plunged them into the fathomless abyss of mysteries ; awed them with heavenly and infernal phantoms ; bound them down to unintelligible and useless dogmas ; and reduced them to the worst species of slavery.—Succeeding events proved that he judged rightly. Men, by resigning their faculties to pretended heavenly commissioners, and becoming the tools of their ambition, exhibited a sense of ignorance, barbarism, cruelty, and villany, beyond any thing which had ever dishonoured the annals of the world. This wretched state remained until some fragments of ancient learning were recovered ; and some persons were tempted, by manly thoughts and fine writing, into reason, into heresies, and rebellions.

WILLIAMS.

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